

Are We to Confess the Sins of Our Ancestors?

NOTE: (All Scripture references in this document are from the New King James Version (NKJV). Other abbreviations, such as KJV or NIV, will be used to indicate that the verse is from a different version of the Bible.)

Some Christians believe that we should confess the sins of our ancestors, just as the Israelites did in the Old Testament.

This practice is based on the belief that the sins of our ancestors can have a negative impact on our lives, even if we ourselves did not commit those sins.

There is some debate, however, about whether or not we should confess the sins of our ancestors, and under what conditions we should do so.

Some people believe that we should only confess the sins of our ancestors if we ourselves are following in their footsteps. Others believe that we should confess the sins of our ancestors regardless of whether or not we are following in their footsteps.

In this article, I'll be showing why we only need to confess the sins of our ancestors, if we continue in their footsteps by committing the same sins as them.

The text in question

Leviticus 26:39-42—And those of you who are left shall waste away **IN THEIR INIQUITY** in your enemies' lands; also **in their FATHERS' INIQUITIES**, which are **WITH THEM** [that is, with those who were to waste away in the land], they shall waste away. But if they confess their iniquity and the iniquity of their fathers [which was with them], with their unfaithfulness in which they were unfaithful to Me, and that they also have walked contrary to Me, and that I also have walked contrary to them and have brought them into the land of their enemies; if their uncircumcised hearts are humbled, and they accept their guilt—then I will remember My covenant with Jacob, and My covenant with Isaac and My covenant with Abraham I will remember; I will remember the land.

NOTE: This passage appears to give the impression that we are meant to confess the sins of our ancestors, as their sins could have an impact on our life in the present. However, under what circumstances are we to confess the sins of our ancestors? Are we to confess them without any regard as to whether or not we have committed the same sins? These are the questions we'll seek to answer.

Another look at the Ten Commandments

Exodus 20:5-6—you shall not bow down to them nor serve them. For I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, **visiting [punishing] the iniquity of the fathers** upon the children **to the third and fourth generations of those who HATE ME**, but showing mercy to thousands, **to those who love Me and keep My commandments**.

NOTE: There are two points in this verse that I'd like to emphasise:

1. The iniquity of the fathers **are ONLY VISITED upon the children who HATE GOD**. This hatred is demonstrated by **breaking** God's Ten Commandments. How so? If **loving God** is shown by **keeping His Commandments**, then **hating God** (the opposite of love) would be shown by **doing the opposite**: breaking His Commandments.
2. When the **third and fourth generations** are reached, then God punishes, or visits, the children of **those generations**. The expression "**to the third and fourth generations**," implies that the children would still be walking in the sinful ways of their ancestors, at the time when God punishes them for their ancestors' sins.

We can, therefore, conclude that **ONLY** those who follow **the sinful example of their ancestors** will be punished **for their sins**, as they themselves **are committing the same sins as well**. One who **does not walk** in the ways of their ancestors, **will not be punished** for their sins, of which **they had no share**.

Is it until or at the third and fourth generation?

Genesis 15:15-16—Now as for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried at a good old age. **But IN the fourth generation** they shall return here, **FOR THE INIQUITY of the Amorites is not yet complete**.

NOTE: We have here the example of the Amorites, who were a nation that practised idolatry (1 Kings 21:26). Notice how God links **the fourth generation** to the fact that **their iniquities or sins have not yet reached the limit of God's patience**. In other words, God's patience would run out **ONCE** the fourth generation had been reached. Once the fourth generation **is reached**, God would then execute judgement. Why? Because for four generations they **had not repented of their evil ways**. We can see that it is **in the third and fourth generations** that God would **execute judgement** upon those who **continue** to break His law, as there obviously has been **no sign of genuine repentance**, otherwise they would have stopped their evil course, and God's judgements cease.

Time for some mathematics

Numbers 32:13—So the LORD's anger was aroused against Israel, and He made them wander in the wilderness **forty years, UNTIL all the generation that had done evil in the sight of the LORD was gone.**

NOTE: Did you catch that? It took **forty years** to get rid of an entire **generation**. Therefore, **forty years is a Biblical generation.** Let's do some calculations:

Third Generation:

40 years X 3 generations = 120 years

Fourth Generation:

40 years X 4 generations = 160 years

NOTE: Based on these calculations (who said maths wouldn't be fun!), we can see that God would wait between 120 and 160 years BEFORE He dished out (so to speak) punishment upon the third and fourth generations. What a great **example of God's long-suffering** toward rebellious humanity! How can we ensure that **we do not presume** upon God's long-suffering?

Put to death for your own sins?

Deuteronomy 24:16—Fathers **shall not be put to death for their children, nor shall children be put to death for their fathers; a person shall be put to death for his own sin.**

Ezekiel 18:4, 20—Behold, all souls are Mine; the soul of the father as well as the soul of the son is Mine; **the soul who sins shall die... The soul who sins shall die. The son shall not bear the guilt of the father, nor the father bear the guilt of the son. The righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself.**

NOTE: Wait what?! We just read that **it was possible for a person** to be put to death for **their ancestors' sins**, granted that they actually **participated in their sins**. How, then, can it be said that someone **is put to death for their own sins?** The answer is simple! If we were to read Ezekiel 18:1-20, we would see that, if **a man was righteous and did what God required of him faithfully** (Ezekiel 18:5-9), and had a son **who was rebellious and disobedient** (Ezekiel 18:10-13) the father **would not die or bear the guilt of his son, because the father did not PARTICIPATE in his child's sins.** However, if this evil son had a son **who did what was right in God's eyes** (Ezekiel 18:14-18), he **would not die for his father's sins, because he did not PARTICIPATE in his father's sins.** The key word is: **participation**. Those who did not participate in the sin were not punished, **while those who sinned were punished for their own sins, since no one else had participated in them.**

Ellen G. White makes the following remarks:

*It is inevitable that children **should suffer from the CONSEQUENCES [the results]** of parental wrongdoing, **but they are not punished for the parents' guilt, EXCEPT as they PARTICIPATE in their sins.** It is **usually the case**, however, **that children walk in the steps of their parents.** By **INHERITANCE and EXAMPLE** the sons become **partakers of the father's sin. Wrong tendencies, perverted appetites, and debased morals,** as well as physical disease and degeneracy, **are transmitted as a legacy from father to son, to the third and fourth generation [this implies a progressive transmission of wrong habits]. This fearful truth** should have a solemn power **to restrain men from following a course of sin.**—[Ellen G. White, Patriarchs and Prophets, p.306](#)*

Noted Bible commentator Albert Barnes bears his testimony:

*The idea that Jeremiah and Ezekiel (marginal reference) **modified the terms of the second Commandment** arises from **a mistaken exegesis** [interpretation] of their words. Compare Jeremiah 32:18; Deuteronomy 24:16. The obdurate [stubborn or resistant] Jews **made it a reproach to the divine justice** that the **nation was to be sorely visited for Manasseh's sin.** But this was **ONLY** because **GENERATION AFTER GENERATION [to the third and fourth generation, remember?]** had, instead of repenting, **REPEATED the sins of that evil time, and even in a worse form. Justice** must at length have its course. The acknowledgment that each man died for his own iniquity **was a sign of their return to a more just and right state of feeling.**—[Barnes' Notes on the Whole Bible, comment on Jeremiah 31:29](#)*

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